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David E. Schneider, *Bartók, Hungary, and the Renewal of Tradition: Case Studies in the Intersection of Modernity and Nationality*, California Studies in 20th-Century Music, 5 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2006), ISBN 978 0 520 24503 7 (hb)

Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music Divided: Bartók's Legacy in Cold War Culture*, California Studies in 20th-Century Music, 7 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2007), ISBN 978 0 520 24965 3 (hb)

Half a century has passed since Pierre Boulez described Bartók, in a dictionary article, as 'undeniably [. . .] one of the "big five" of contemporary music, alongside Stravinsky, Webern, Schoenberg and Berg'.[1] Leaving aside the question how contemporary any of these composers, apart from Stravinsky, still were in 1958, when Boulez's article came out, the choice is characteristic of the image of modernism that survived the Second World War and persists to some extent into our own day. While disliking a good half of Bartók's best-known works, Boulez admired in the other half qualities that he saw as fundamental to the progress of modern music: the 'barbaric violence which characterizes all Bartók's best pages',[2] the rhythmic experimentation, the chromatic intricacies of the middle-period quartets and the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*: a sort of fusion, that is, between *The Rite of Spring* and *Erwartung*. Anything that spoke too openly of Hungarianism or nationalism as such, 'the dubious-taste, Liszt-gypsy tradition', the 'recourse to the spirit of folksong', those aspects of 'the old musical world whose contradictions [Bartók] could never quite overcome',[3] was faintly regrettable at best, more or less contemptible at worst. Modernism had become something stereotyped, uniform, and purposeful, context-free, a product of central aesthetic planning and stern research.

In the case of Stravinsky it took several decades for this monochrome picture to be coloured in; and with Bartók it has taken still longer, partly, I suppose, because even fewer western scholars know about Hungary and understand its language than know Russia and understand Russian. Judit Frigyesi's superb *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest*[4] was the first substantial work to rescue the composer from the somewhat colourless terrain of the standard biographies and analytical studies on the one hand, and the communist-period obfuscations on the other, and return him to the intellectually and aesthetically formative context of the Budapest of his student years, the Budapest of Endre Ady and the symbolists, the Budapest which formed *Bluebeard's Castle* and from which Bartók and Kodály sallied forth on their first collecting expeditions in 1904 and 1905. Now two excellent new studies have appeared that in their various ways complement Frigyesi's approach and in certain

1 'Béla Bartók', originally pubd in Fasquelle's *Encyclopédie de la musique*, vol. 1 (1958), repr. in Pierre Boulez, *Relevés d'apprenti*, ed. Paule Thénevin (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 299–305 (304); trans. Stephen Walsh in *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 237–42 (242).

2 Boulez, *Stocktakings*, 240.

3 Boulez, *Stocktakings*, 241–2.

4 Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998.

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respects bring it up to date. David Schneider's *Bartók, Hungary, and the Renewal of Tradition* is a meticulous, score-based investigation of the complex sources of Bartók's musical language, a subject fraught with confusion and misinformation, much of which originated with the composer himself. Danielle Fosler-Lussier's *Music Divided* examines Bartók's music in the context of its post-war influence, both in Hungary and outside. Between them the two authors raise general issues of modernism at, so to speak, both ends: in its beginnings and in its outcomes, issues invariably oversimplified by those numerous historians who have found it convenient to take the concept at its own estimation.

At bottom, Schneider's series of connected essays is a systematic attempt to resolve the vexed question of Bartók's nationalism, or rather to distinguish its different phases and to classify the by no means straightforward relationships between those phases and their apparently conflicting musical sources. It doesn't take much study of Bartók to realize that the patriotic nationalism of his student years in Budapest up to 1903 (in which year he told his mother that 'all my life [. . .] I shall have one objective: the good of Hungary and the Hungarian nation')[5] transmogrified quite swiftly into something closer to what we would now call ethnomusicology, albeit still with a Hungarocentric tinge. As a result of his collecting expeditions, he became fascinated by the variety of folk musics of pre-1920 Greater Hungary, including those of the Romanians and gypsies (though apparently not the Saxon Germans) of Transylvania, and the Slovaks to the north. This change, as is well known and as Schneider demonstrates through analysis, is reflected in Bartók's own music. At the time of *Kossuth* (1903) and the Rhapsody, Op. 1 (1904), Bartók 'expressed his nationalist sympathies in every aspect of his behavior, from dressing in a traditional Hungarian suit to calling his sister Böske, the Hungarian equivalent of her Germanic given name, Elza' (65). And the music of both works displays the conventional badges of nineteenth-century Hungarianism, derived partly from the *verbunkos* recruiting dances of the eighteenth, partly from the so-called *magyar nóta* (the supposedly pseudo-folk music of nineteenth-century Hungarian popular song), much of it diffracted through the gypsy music of Budapest cafés and restaurants (still to be heard in tourist establishments to this day). Having discovered in 1905 in the villages of the *puszta* what he recognized as a genuine Hungarian peasant music quite distinct – as he believed – from the ersatz Hungarianism of Liszt and Erkel, Bartók set about evolving a personal style completely independent of that tradition, authentic in its harmonic and rhythmic elements, hypermodern in its implications, while at the same time adopting a taxonomic approach to the collected material much closer to that of a modern ethnomusicologist. In this way, the argument might conclude, he moved away from patriotic (or 'Romantic', as Schneider calls it) nationalism and became instead a politically neutral student of national typologies.'It is now well known,' János Kárpáti wrote in 1967, 'that the origins of [the works of Bartók's youth] lay in the "verbunkos" recruiting music and popular art songs – that is, they have nothing in common with the deeper layers of Hungarian music discovered by Bartók and Kodály.'[6] But Schneider shows that the truth is subtler and more

5 Letter of 8 September 1903; quoted in Schneider, 33.

6 János Kárpáti, *Bartók's String Quartets*, trans. Fred Macnicol (Budapest: Corvina, 1975), 66.

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interesting. In a wide-ranging chapter tracing the origins of 'The Night's Music' in *Out of Doors* (1926), he proves beyond much doubt that, for all its uncompromising modernism of harmony and texture, 'The Night's Music' is indebted to a specific type of pastoral writing – musical portraiture of the morose air of the Hungarian plain – that formed a branch of the nineteenth-century *verbunkos* tradition, and he identifies and analyses specific examples in music by Mosonyi and Erkel. That Bartók was aware of this tradition is obvious – these were repertory composers in *fin-de-siècle* Budapest – and Schneider duly detects its influence in the Second Suite for small orchestra (1905). But the link with 'The Night's Music' is more suggestive, and could, moreover, have been extended to other works of Bartók's most severely modernist phase, for instance the slow movement of the Fourth Quartet, with its achingly beautiful evocation of, surely, that same melancholy landscape. In fact the more you look at middle-period Bartók, the more you see of the supposedly rejected tradition. The violin rhapsodies of the late twenties are, of course, conscious hybrids (Schneider has a brilliantly circuitous explanation of how and why Bartók fabricated the First Rhapsody out of Romanian and Hungarian peasant styles, elements of *verbunkos*, and gypsy cimbalom music, and then concealed his sources); but *verbunkos* is also present, however much disguised, in the exactly contemporary Third Quartet – both its double *lassú-friss* form and some aspects of its musical vocabulary. The point is that by this time Bartók was aware that the supposedly pure and ancient peasant music of the *puszta* was itself partly touched by gypsy music and the *verbunkos*. Kárpáti's hard distinction was, in short, a myth.

For Bartók, the various consequences of this research were even more problematical politically than artistically. He may himself have shed at least the more superficial trappings of patriotic nationalism, but his fellow countrymen, still smarting from the huge territorial losses of Trianon, emphatically had not. Even Bartók, for all his scholarly detachment and 'brotherhood-of-peoples' stance, preserved more than a trace of Magyar suprematism, in which the pulling together of neighbouring ethnic elements into his own music had, Schneider suggests, a distinctly irredentist appearance, as if arguing 'for the reestablishment of the unity of the Carpathian basin under Hungarian leadership' (186). To Hungarians, though, this flirting with Romanian and Slovak materials looked distinctly unpatriotic, while Romanians, noting that Bartók had been born in what was now their territory, did their best to claim him for themselves. Poor Bartók: in everyone's bad books, like humanists down the ages. Studiously, and above all discreetly, apolitical, he simply could not avoid his slightest actions being used for political ends. Even his attitude to the Nazis, which Schneider shows was only partly conditioned by moral factors, has been routinely interpreted, even by thoughtful biographers, as purely brave and high-minded. Meanwhile, the Hungarian authorities did their best to sideline this unaccommodating composer of rather disagreeable music, and more or less ignored his fiftieth birthday in 1931, although, as Schneider remarks acidly, 'the Hungarian Opera [. . .] did offer a greeting of sorts – two days after Bartók's birthday it cancelled what was to have been the Hungarian premiere of *The Miraculous Mandarin*' (225). That same week the French government, by contrast, awarded him the Légion d'honneur. Here, too, Schneider is quick to point up the irony that, while 'Bartók's reputation abroad rested to a certain extent on his status as Hungary's foremost composer

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[. . .] in Hungary his reputation (not to be mistaken for popularity) rested on his status as Hungary's only composer to be widely recognized in elite musical circles abroad' (225).

In the second half of the thirties, the situation in Budapest began to change as far as Bartók was concerned, and here Schneider uses the political context as the starting point for a penetrating critique of the evolution of the composer's late style. As one outcome, he argues, of the Hungarian prime minister Gyula Gömbös's wooing of the proto-Nazi Folk Writers group in 1934, Bartók's own folk-based music came back into qualified favour: the following year *The Wooden Prince* received a folksy staging at the Opera (its first since 1919), and the year after that Bartók became the first musician to be elected to the Academy of Sciences. Schneider considers that Bartók responded to this enhanced recognition, and the succession of performances it seems to have prompted, by adopting a more approachable manner in his next few works. He specifically analyses the Second Violin Concerto in this light, discussing its clear reversion to elements of the *verbunkos* style and to lyrical gestures and tonal structures in general. He cites György Kroó's bafflement at the Concerto's apparent failure to reflect the growing political tensions and fears of the time, and also Halsey Stevens's suggestion that the twelve-note elements were sardonically meant. He acknowledges that, for many composers, the thirties were a time of stylistic retrenchment, but hints at a specific disagreement with Kroó on the issue of response. 'To argue persuasively,' he insists, 'for a connection between aspects of the musical style of the Violin Concerto and the relevant political and musical contexts of its time while trivializing neither work nor context requires a delicate balancing of general mood and specific circumstances, public and private' (219).

Whether or not Schneider fully resolves this difficulty is open to question, but much of what he says about it is suggestive. His idea, for instance, that Bartók may (consciously or subconsciously) have been referring back to the Austro-Hungarian associations of *verbunkos* looks crude on the surface. But in the sense that fear and insecurity tend to breed nostalgia and a desire for warmth and safety, the idea is not entirely absurd. In any case it emphasizes the essential point that, as we see throughout this well-thought-out book, such elements were never wholly absent from Bartók's music. As for Stevens's point, the extent of Bartók's real debt to the Second Viennese School still awaits its Schneider; he has a good chapter on the Stravinsky influence, but little on the Viennese (and, incidentally, almost nothing at all on Debussy, who was surely a prime influence on what Schneider calls, after Dahlhaus, the *Klangfläche* technique of Bartók's landscape music). Yet Berg's *Lyric Suite*, which Bartók almost certainly heard in Baden-Baden in 1927, audibly lies behind the Third Quartet, and especially the Fourth, with its schematic figurations, hexachordal pitch structures, and kaleidoscopic string sonorities. It was Bartók's supposed failure to pursue that direction which later got him into such trouble with René Leibowitz (and, by extension, Boulez); and thereby hangs another book, a fragment of which forms a chapter of the Fosler-Lussier study.

If *Music Divided* has an underlying thesis, it is the vicious irony of Bartók's rejection after the Second World War by the Eastern bloc for being too modern and by the Western bloc for not being modern enough, a positively Voltairean twist on Schneider's *mot* about the composer's reputation at home and abroad in the thirties. Fosler-Lussier begins with the Hungarian premiere of the *Concerto for Orchestra* in Budapest in 1947, and the work's

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devastating effects on Budapest musical politics in the years just before and just after the communist takeover in Hungary. She charts the divided response between those modernists (not yet extinct or in prison in the People's Democracy) who admired Bartók's most rebarbative twenties music and found the *Concerto* puzzlingly unforbidding, and those who saw it as a welcome gesture towards populism: 'Out from the coldly lit world of the laboratory,' as the composer Endre Szervánszky put it, 'out among the people!' (3). Little did he know . . .

There follows a detailed, well-informed, and well-characterized investigation of the effects of the Moscow Zhdanovshchina of 1948 on the all too closely knit musical community of Budapest. For a time it seemed that Bartók's late works, at any rate, might turn out to be the precise answer to Zhdanov's prescription. Perhaps, composers mused, 'the vanguard of socialist music would arise not in the Soviet Union but in Hungary' (7). Touching thought! The Kodály pupil Ferenc Szabó, back from a fifteen-year exile in the Soviet Union, wrote a large symphonic poem called *Homecoming* (1948), more or less candidly modelled, as Fosler-Lussier demonstrates, on Bartók's *Concerto*; but within two years it was denounced by Zhdanov's emissaries as too individualistic and formalist, and Szabó was informed in no uncertain terms that 'the sooner he gives up toying with antiquated modernist "relics", the greater the contribution he will make to Hungarian musical life'.[7] Szabó took the hint and had soon worked himself into a position of power, from which he proceeded to hurl imprecations at his less immediately accommodating former colleagues. As acting president of the Musicians' Association, he was one of the main accusers of his fellow composers András Mihály and Endre Székely when they were purged at the end of 1950. Mihály's case, which Fosler-Lussier explores in some detail, is symbolic. In his routine self-inculpations, he was at first, as the author puts it, 'far from humble', but then, in a second 'confession', he accused himself more roundly of confusion and error specifically over the Bartók question – in having praised the *Concerto for Orchestra*, and having even not taken steps to ensure that *The Miraculous Mandarin* vanished from the boards of the Opera House. Fortunately, disgraced musicians were not regarded as important enough for elimination, and Mihály survived, stripped of his posts but permitted to continue teaching and composing. Fosler-Lussier examines his Cello Concerto of 1953, shows how he courageously persisted in modelling himself on Bartók, but argues, nevertheless, that on the whole the work 'treads a cautious path' (144).

Meanwhile, something comparable was happening to Bartók's reputation in the higher echelons of modern music in the West. First on the attack was Leibowitz, in a still historically (if not musicologically) important essay called 'Béla Bartók, or the Possibility of Compromise in Contemporary Music'.[8] Broadly, Leibowitz's argument was that Bartók had had within his grasp, in his middle period, the means to develop music towards 'greater complexity and symmetry' by way of a more 'advanced' style than his predecessors, but had rejected this opportunity and instead chosen 'a less praiseworthy path, which was the *path of compromise*'.[9] This was the argument subsequently made famous in a more extreme form by

7 Anatoly Novikov, 'A mai Magyarország', *Szabad nép*, 12 July 1950; quoted in Fosler-Lussier, 26.
8 In *Transition Forty-Eight*, no. 3 (1948), 92–123.
9 Quoted in Fosler-Lussier, 31–2 (emphasis original).

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Boulez in his 'Trajectoires' essay of 1949, and echoes of it can also be heard in Adorno's *Philosophie der neuen Musik*.[10] At the Darmstadt Summer Schools it became more or less official doctrine, although Boulez's anti-Schoenbergian ('Schoenberg est mort') twist was a bit too much even for that Mecca of progress, which cleaved rather to Hermann Scherchen's formulation that 'the twelve-tone composers alone did not shirk the task that art assigns to every truly creative artist: consciously to develop new, finer capabilities in the human being'.[11]

The political aspects of all this do not escape Fosler-Lussier; in fact her book is organized around them. Of course, the mandarins of Darmstadt were busy distancing themselves from pretty well everything to do with what had been, for most of them, a nasty and in some cases disreputable past, just as the commissars of Moscow and Budapest claimed to be detaching themselves from misconceptions in their own past. Both sides were obsessed with the prevalence of error and the necessity of compliance, and, while they differed from each other in the kind and degree of sanction they were in a position to impose on transgressors, one isn't always entirely convinced that, had the axe and the torture chamber been available to the extreme modernists, someone somewhere – in Paris, Cologne, or Milan – wouldn't have advocated their use. On the whole we can be happy that both lots have (with one or two distinguished exceptions) been consigned to the history that they endeavoured to people with their own aesthetic enemies. Perhaps they are at this very minute in conversation with Bartók, or even playing his music. And meanwhile, it is an excellent thing that a scholar like Fosler-Lussier, with the necessary languages at her disposal and free access to every relevant archive under the sun, can bring together all this material, much of it previously inaccessible, and paint a picture that at least starts to look complete and comprehensible, and all this, astonishingly enough, out of the posthumous experiences of one composer. Personally, I should welcome, from time to time, a shade less detachment, a shade more anger, at the destruction and misery wrought by these bullying artistic maniacs, with their textbooks and their diagrams, their absurd and futile doctrines, and their mean little vendettas. But this is not the scholar's way, and *Music Divided* is no doubt a more balanced book for its absence.

And where does this leave our hero? He survives, of course, largely undamaged – no longer, perhaps, one of any Big Five, but big in his own right, his works increasingly played and increasingly studied. And while these books change nothing in the music, they do, I think, enrich our understanding of many aspects of it, warning us how narrow has been the conception of his work and its contents on the part of those who have tried hardest to canonize it. They remind me of something Bartók is supposed to have said to Andor Foldes after a particularly modernistic run-through of the Second Piano Concerto: 'Not so violent, Andor, not so . . . Bartókian.'

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10 Pierre Boulez, 'Trajectoires', *Contrepoints* 6 (1949), 122–42; Eng. trans. in Boulez, *Stocktakings*, 188–208. Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1949); Eng. trans. by Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Bloomster (London: Sheed & Ward, 1973).

11 Hermann Scherchen, 'Die gegenwärtige Situation der modernen Musik', *Melos* 16/10 (1949), 257–9; quoted in Fosler-Lussier, 34.

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